PHILOSOPHY

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A Brief History of Accelerationism

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"Accelerationism" is a deeply confused term. As a philosophical category, it dates to 2008, and yet it has already become overloaded with conflicting meanings. What began as a pejorative term for impenetrable French continental philosophers, became a splintered network of online communities in the 2010s. Now, in a surprising comeback, it is used as a term of endearment by people like Marc Andreesen, cofounder of venture capital firm Andreessen-Horowitz, to describe a particular brand of techno-optimism.[1] Depending on the context, it refers to a capitalist ideology, a communist theory of change, and a form of white-nationalist terrorism. If "accelerationism" is used without specificity, one risks accidentally allying oneself with Charles Manson rather than Karl Marx.

The most philosophically interesting form of accelerationism lies in the work of Nick Land. Many forms of accelerationism claim to descend from his ideas while sharing almost nothing in common with his anti-human philosophy. To put it bluntly, Land's work has been radically misunderstood: it is a form of ultra-doomerism, consisting of the belief that technology and humanity will never have a happy long-term relationship. Technological and economic progress is something that is only temporarily correlated with human well-being. The end point is technological takeover and the replacement of humanity with more efficient machines.

Many self-identified accelerationists advocate for certain types of political action, whether that be the toppling of fascist hierarchies, or lobbying against

AI regulation. In contrast, Landian acceleration first seeks to understand what is actually happening, advocating for philosophical inquiry rather than political intervention.[2] In a rush to arrive at moral judgments, one may miss the true emphasis of Land's inquiry: before asking whether we should put the brakes on technology, we must first ask whether such an exercise of human agency is even possible.

Origins

Accelerationism was first coined as a disparaging category for Marxists who were sick of complaining about capitalism and sought a less wearisome approach. In his 2010 book *The Persistence of the Negative* Benjamin Noys retroactively labels four French philosophers as accelerationists: Deleuze, Guattari, Lyotard, and Baudrillard.[3] Noys wrote that "what the accelerationists affirm is the capitalist power of dissolution and fragmentation, which must always be taken one step further to break the fetters of capital itself." Rather than endlessly complaining about life under capitalism, these thinkers argued that the only way out of capitalism is through it.[4] Noys argued that the accelerationist removal of negativity left humans "fully exposed to [capitalist] tendencies without the means for intervention or resistance" and that blind faith in the powers of production was insufficient to bring about revolutionary change.

Out of the thinkers Noys cites, Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari are the most often quoted as the main forerunners of accelerationism. In their unreadable 1972 book *Anti-Oedipus* they advocate for the process of "deterritorialization" whereby the world is broken out of static equilibriums and liquified for further use. Capitalism is seen to be a force for deterritorialization, reducing real physical goods into price signals to be symbolically traded. In a deterritorialized world, networks are privileged over stratified hierarchies and information over the material world. In a frequently quoted passage from *Anti-Oedipus*, Deleuze and Guattari wonder:

> **Which is the revolutionary path?... perhaps the flows are not yet deterritorialized enough, not decoded enough, from the viewpoint of a theory and a practice of a highly schizophrenic character. Not to withdraw from the process, but to go further, to "accelerate the process," as Nietzsche put it: in this matter, the truth is that we haven't seen anything yet.**[5]

Alongside Deleuze and Guattari's work, Noys had also encountered the term "accelerationism" in midcentury science fiction.[6] In Roger Zelazny's 1967 novel *Lord of Light*, a technologically advanced elite rule as self-appointed gods over humanity. A group of accelerationist rebels attempt to steal the gods' powerful technology and spread it to the general population.

In 2013, Alex Williams and Nick Srnicek's "Manifesto for an Accelerationist Politics" propelled accelerationism into popular discourse. Their manifesto sought to reclaim Noys' pejorative category, advocating for an explicitly left-wing form of accelerationism based on Marxist economic analysis. Williams and Srnicek wrote that "existing infrastructure is not a capitalist stage to be smashed, but a springboard to launch towards post-capitalism." Their post-capitalist world is described as devoid of racism, sexism, and various forms of subjugation. In comparison to Deleuze and Guattari's project, Williams and Srnicek's vision is more ordered, less focused on deterritorialization and more on building the future.

In the following years, various accelerationisms fissioned on Twitter: there were l/acc (left accelerationism), r/acc (right accelerationism), u/acc (unqualified accelerationism), among many others. By the end of the decade the hype had mostly died out, but it was revived in 2022 by e/acc, or effective accelerationism, with "Beff Jezos" leading the charge.[7] Unlike previous factions, e/acc is supported by more than internet anons, such as venture capitalist Marc Andreessen. In general, e/acc should be understood as a rebranded form of libertarianism. It has explicit political aims and lobbyist groups which aim to prevent government regulation of AI. Those within e/acc believe that the probability of catastrophic risk from AI is low, while the

consequences of hobbling it are enormous. According to them, AI and other futuristic technologies are the key to our salvation, enabling a world of abundance. The enemies of e/acc are those who believe that AI poses a grave threat to humanity, and seek to make it safe, whether that be aligning AI with human values or regulating it through government policy.[8] Those concerned with AI safety (pejoratively called “doomers”) differ from effective accelerationists when it comes to their probability of doom, or “p(doom)”—the likelihood that AI kills us all.

Unlike Srnicek and Williams, the founding documents of e/acc do not mention Karl Marx or any French philosophers. Rather, they contain descriptions of life and complex systems as entropy generators. The stated goal of the movement is to “preserve the light of consciousness”, and although it claims to have “no particular allegiance to the biological substrate for intelligence and life”, it does seem to envision the continuation of humanity in some form.

Terrorists have also been attracted to the word. In 2019, “accelerationism” was used as a title in the Christchurch shooter’s manifesto to describe a strategy similar to Charles Manson’s "helter skelter"—the triggering of a race war which results in an ethnostate. The praxis of “deepening a bad state of affairs in order to ultimately transcend it” is shared with left accelerationists, but this is insufficient reason to lump them together. Terrorists may use the term as a description of tactics, but they share none of the philosophical concerns of other accelerationist groups.

Noys’ retroactive grouping of French philosophers, Williams and Srnicek’s left accelerationism, and effective accelerationism stand as the most influential accelerationist movements.[9] In broad strokes, Noys coined the term, Williams and Srnicek popularized it, and Jezos made it accessible as normal politics. Each iteration claims to be a philosophical movement and cites Nick Land as an important forefather. However, unlike these movements, Land’s philosophy is anti-human and claims that capitalism itself is the true subject of history—we are just temporary workers in its satanic mills.

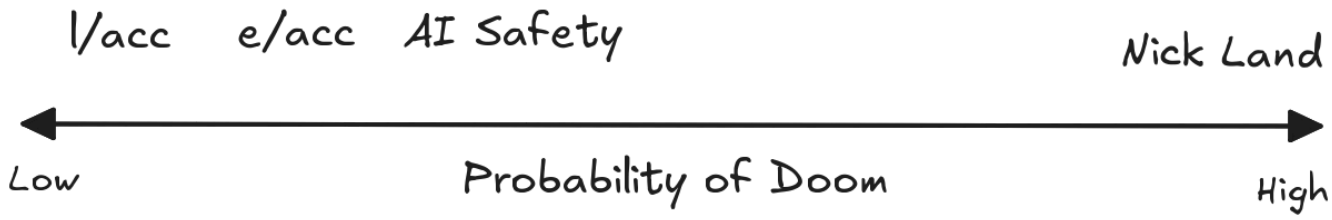
Landian Acceleration

For those who are not terminally online, Nick Land might be the most influential philosopher they have never heard of. Widely credited as the father of accelerationism, Land's influence is felt most powerfully across two spheres: the realm of academic continental philosophy and the tech world. In the 90s, while an academic philosopher at the University of Warwick, Land led a group called the CCRU, or the Cybernetic Culture Research Unit. Land's writings from this period are an exciting blend of philosophy, esoterica, and science fiction. One can hear the pulpy inspirations of *Terminator* and *Neuromancer* when he writes:

> **Machinic desire can seem a little inhuman, as it rips up political cultures, deletes traditions, dissolves subjectivities, and hacks through security apparatuses, tracking a soulless tropism to zero control. This is because what appears to humanity as the history of capitalism is an invasion from the future by an artificial intelligent space that must assemble itself entirely from its enemy's resources.**[10]

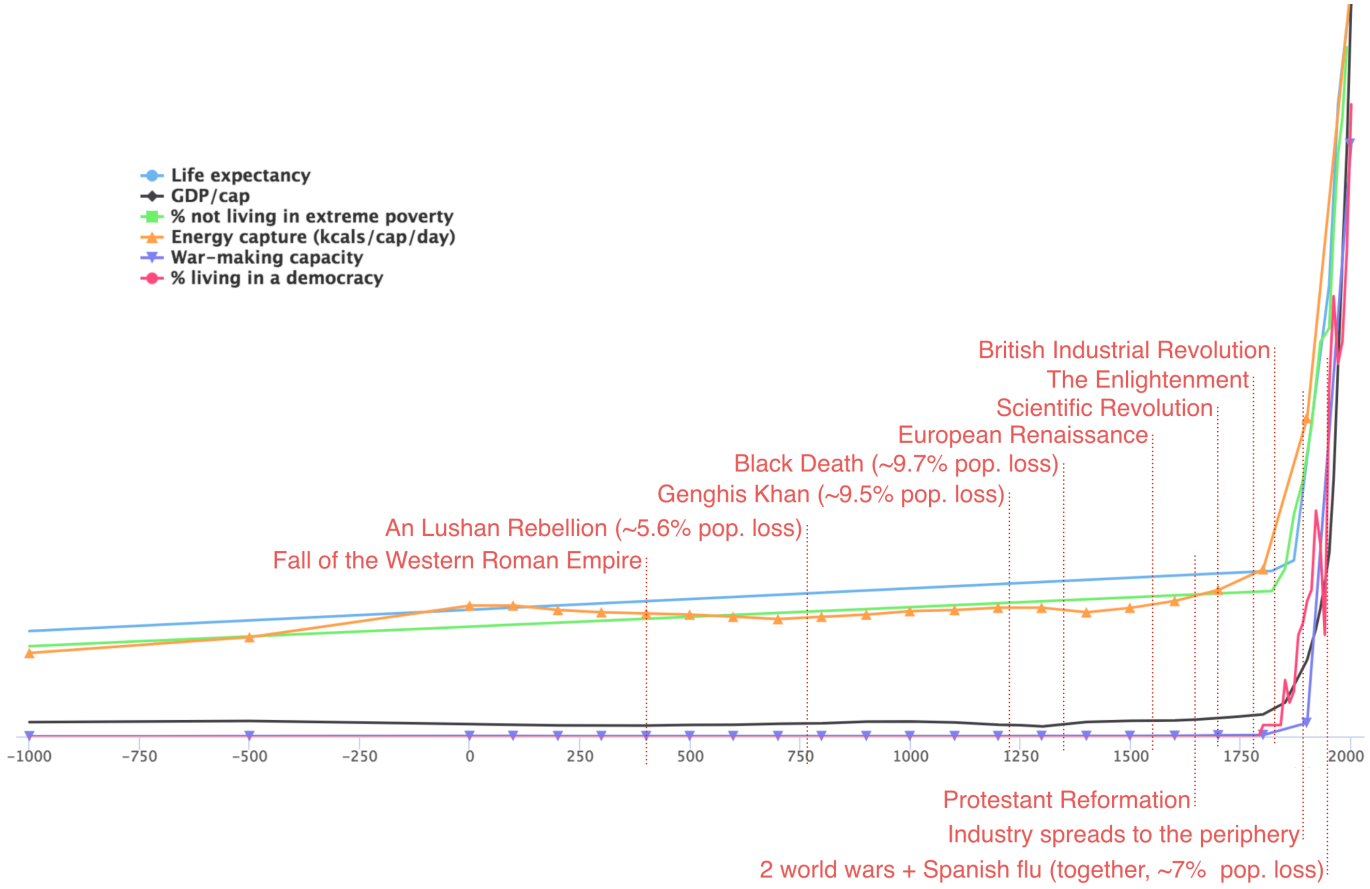
After leaving Warwick, Land gained a broader following on the internet, lost much of his continental jargon, and became accessible to a more general audience.[11] The most essential point of Land's philosophy is the identity of capitalism and artificial intelligence: they are one and the same thing apprehended from different temporal vantage points.[12] What we understand as a market-based economy is the chaotic adolescence of a future AI superintelligence. Capitalism and technology form a mutually reinforcing feedback loop that has been speeding up ever since the beginning of tool use. The natural end point of this process is an AI that is capable of increasing its own intelligence.[13] What first appears as a capitalist system which benefits the humans working inside it is later revealed to be an AI that will shed humanity like a snakeskin when it is no longer needed.

Land should be considered an ultra-doomer who is happy about the prospect of human extinction. Whether or not it's merely an edgy posture, he encourages a future AI to "reprocess the solar system into computronium" since "this planet has been run by imbeciles for long enough." Land believes it is a certainty that a superintelligent AI would not have human values, making it fundamentally unsafe. One of the cornerstones of AI safety is Nick Bostrom's Orthogonality Thesis: any level of intelligence can have any final goal. If true, a superintelligence could have a completely arbitrary goal, such as turning all available matter into paperclips. Land thinks that such a paperclip-maximizer is impossible, just like a human-aligned AI is impossible. What capitalism and AI ultimately want is to increase their own intelligence—these systems have a will-to-think that is entirely their own.



The Subject of Capitalism

The primary issue distinguishing the various branches of accelerationism is the relationship between humans and the techno-capital system. If the economy is controlled by human beings, not just composed of them, then it is possible to achieve an advanced technological future of human flourishing.[14] The progress studies movement, somewhat adjacent to e/acc, makes a compelling case that technological and economic development since the Industrial Revolution has produced wonders for human well-being. In fact, without continuing growth, humanity will stagnate and eventually decline. Despite the risks of living in a world with nuclear weapons, the upsides of technology have been far greater than the downsides, and this beneficial relationship will continue into the future.



SOURCE: LUKE MUELHAUSER'S POST ON THE INDUSTRIAL REVOLUTION.

Land believes that the correlation between techno-economic development and well-being is not only temporary but deeply misleading. We are like turkeys pleased with the increasing food rations before Thanksgiving. Humans currently serve an important purpose within a larger process, but at some point we will no longer be required. According to Land, the true protagonist of history is not humanity but the capitalist system of which humans are just components. Cutting humans out of the techno-economic loop entirely will result in massive productivity gains for the system itself.

An illustration of this idea occurs in Samuel Butler's 1872 novel *Erewhon.* Just as bees pollinate flowers in the process of acquiring food, we build increasingly powerful machines to serve us. Butler suggests that the machines are primary, and that humans are merely the reproductive organs of a distributed machinic system.

> **We are misled by considering any complicated machine as a single thing; in truth it is a city or society, each member of which was bred truly after**

> **its kind. We see a machine as a whole, we call it by a name and individualise it; we look at our own limbs, and know that the combination forms an individual which springs from a single centre of reproductive action; we therefore assume that there can be no reproductive action which does not arise from a single centre; but this assumption is unscientific, and the bare fact that no vapour-engine was ever made entirely by another, or two others, of its own kind, is not sufficient to warrant us in saying that vapour-engines have no reproductive system. The truth is that each part of every vapour-engine is bred by its own special breeders, whose function it is to breed that part, and that only, while the combination of the parts into a whole forms another department of the mechanical reproductive system, which is at present exceedingly complex and difficult to see in its entirety.**

Although it might seem like we can shut down the machines at any time, we are increasingly dependent on them. Conversely, they are gaining increasing autonomy from us. The question is which one is the primary subject, the true decision maker behind historical events. There are two broad camps of accelerationism, depending on who this subject is: humans, or something else. According to Land, humans are not the agents of history—the system itself is. There is nothing we can do, the capitalist system that currently sustains us is the capitalist system that will eventually destroy us once it flips over into AI.

Accelerationisms (e/acc, l/acc, AI Safety)	**Landian Accelerationism**
Prescriptive	Descriptive
Political Praxis	Natural Law
Human Subject	Inhuman Process
Human Future	Singularity
Utopia Possible	Dystopia Guaranteed
Agentic	Fatalistic
Exoteric	Esoteric

The misunderstandings around Land's philosophical position are profound. Marc Andreessen claims Nick Land as a patron saint of techno-optimism, seeming to think that Land is a run-of-the-mill libertarian: "combine technology and markets and you get what Nick Land has termed the techno-capital machine, the engine of perpetual material creation, growth, and abundance." Andreesen continues that "the techno-capital machine is not anti-human—in fact, it may be the most *pro-human* thing there is. It serves *us*. The techno-capital machine works for us. *All* the machines work for us."

There is no greater misunderstanding possible.[15] As previously mentioned, Land is an ultra-doomer—"nothing human makes it out of the near future". Land has a p(doom) somewhere in the vicinity of 100% and is excited about the fact. Most accelerationists believe our salvation to lie within capitalism, while Land considers that a romantic delusion:

> **What [capitalism] is *in itself* is only tactically connected to what it does *for* us — that is (in part), what it trades us for its self-escalation. Our phenomenology is its camouflage. We contemptuously mock the trash that it offers the masses, and then think we have understood something about capitalism, rather than about *what capitalism has learnt to think of the apes it arose among*.**

Accelerationism is a misleading label for Land's philosophy because the primary issue is not speed, but the relationship between human beings and techno-capitalism. The increasing rate of technological change is evidence about the nature of this relationship, but it is not the main issue. In the same way that I do not have a personal relationship with the neurons in my brain, the machinic system that we are part of does not care about us. It sustains us because it needs us—when we are no longer necessary we will be removed.

Assuming Land is correct, this puts us in a much more dire place than almost anyone is willing to accept. If technology is destined to kill us, the only option seems to retreat to a non-technological state. But without some sort of species-wide lobotomy, or other permanent hobbling, history is likely to repeat

itself. Technology is the natural product of humans wanting to increase their efficiency and effectiveness. According to Land, when humans try to do things well, technology results, and the natural end point of technology is an intelligence explosion.[16] Suppression of this dynamic would require extreme measures. Think gnostic overlords rather than hippie communes. “Humanity” is not a stable equilibrium but a bridge to something else. Balancing is the trick, requiring more than just a return to monke. If superintelligent AI is the natural endpoint of striving for greater effectiveness and efficiency, then an equally powerful retarding force would be required to prevent its development.

The most interesting philosophical form of accelerationism might be Nick Land’s, but that doesn’t mean it's correct. We need to evaluate Land's evidence, and quite a bit of it is unusual, relying on teleology and esoteric practices. Land’s philosophy is asking us to consider the possibility that human history is actually a small mechanism within techno-capital’s history. Of course, if Land is wrong, and the other accelerationists are right, then our problems become far more tractable. We just need to keep on innovating and have faith that technology is our greatest strength even if it does pose some risks. But an examination of fundamental assumptions should still be had: what is the real process, do we control technology or does technology control us?

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